“I can’t afford to support every worthy cause”: The role of donor taste, beneficiary need and nonprofit competence in selection of recipients for charitable donations

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Introduction

This panel session is predicated on the assumption that a distinctive feature of the third sector is that it is values-driven, that values motivating philanthropic action are held by individuals, organisations and society at large, and that when these values clash it challenges the legitimacy of both motivations and actions.

My paper is concerned with the role that values play as a driver of personalised philanthropy and it focuses on the complex issues involved in choosing one type of charitable beneficiary over another. The data discussed in this paper comes from a larger research programme that explores donor perceptions of the nature and distribution of charitable benefit, and it should be stressed that the findings presented here are interim as they are based on analysis of only half of the data gathered for this study.

The question at the heart of my broader piece of research is the extent to which meeting need is the primary intention of donors and the primary purpose of organisations in receipt of charitable donations. Despite widespread assumptions that charity is a vehicle by which resources are transferred from the better off to those in need, many studies have demonstrated that only a small percentage of charitable benefit is in fact directed to the poor and needy (Odendahl 1990; Clotfelter 1992; Ortmann 1996; Wagner 2000). The absence of a pro-poor orientation is not a modern phenomena, as historic studies demonstrate (Prochaska 1990) and charities are not constitutionally bound to be redistributive, yet previous research finds there is a broad public consensus that, *“to be a charitable concern, a recipient had to be ‘in need’”* (Fenton, Golding et al. 1993:23).

My research therefore explores the gap between the reality of charitable activity (which exists to promote a range of public goods) and public perceptions of charitable activity (which appears to involve high expectations of redistribution). I am interested in evaluating the truth of the following statement that, *"the quintessentially philanthropic act – and the virtue in the philanthropic act – is generally thought to consist in providing for the poor or disadvantaged or attacking the root causes of poverty or disadvantage"* (Reich 2006:27). Against this broader issue of the distributional consequences of philanthropy, this paper focuses on the extent to which 'meeting need' is a significant factor in the decision-making processes of individual, committed donors regarding their selection of recipient charities and causes.

Decision-making by UK donors has been the subject of previous studies, but these have focused on the very wealthy or have viewed giving as a generic activity, rather than probed the reasons behind specific gifts. For example, Lloyd claims that wealthy donors are motivated by five factors: belief in the cause, being a catalyst for change, self-actualisation, duty and responsibility and relationships (2004:78) whilst Sargeant and Jay suggest that people give (generically) as a result of various forms of self-interest (eg. to promote self-esteem or to access services), as a result of empathy, sympathy, belief in social justice and to conform to social norms (Sargeant and Jay 2004:99-102). This paper differs in presenting data and analysis of the ways that non-wealthy donors describe coming to specific decisions about which causes and charities to support.

Methodology

In order to explore questions regarding donors' perceptions of the nature and distribution of charitable benefit, it was necessary to move beyond the empiricist studies of charitable giving that currently dominate research, comprising descriptive statistical exercises which reveal nothing about the *"social reality behind the figures"* (Halfpenny 1999:208). Qualitative research was thought to offer the best hope of comprehending that reality, as such methodologies seek to understand rather than simply count a phenomena; as C Wright Mills noted,

> *"facts and figures are only the beginning of the proper study. Our main interest is in making sense of the facts we know or can readily find out. We do not want merely to take an inventory, we want to discover meanings, for most of our important questions are questions of meanings"* (Mills 1956:364).

It was therefore decided to conduct interviews with current, committed donors to discuss their views on the nature and distribution of charitable benefit and to explore the rationale behind their chartable donations. 60 interviewees were identified as a result of three waves of recruitment by the Charities Aid Foundation who randomly selected charity account holders from their database, filtering by postcode to ensure the sample contained approximately equal numbers of high, medium and lower income donors. The rationale for creating a sample comprised solely of CAF account holders, rather than from the general population, is that despite most people being donors[1], there exists a skewed distribution such that charitable income is reliant upon the disproportionate generosity of a minority of donors (Clegg, Goodey et al. 2008:11). The problems inherent in sampling from the general population are

[1] The UK Giving Survey found that in 2008, 56% of people reported having made a charitable donation in the previous month; this figure was 54% in 2007 and 58% in 2006.

illustrated by the fact that in 2008, the mean monthly donations per donor was £33 yet the median donation per person was just £1 (Clegg, Goodey et al. 2008:9). Whilst CAF account holders are not representative in terms of income, age or geographical location (they tend towards being richer, older and disproportionately from the south-east), they are, by definition, proactive and committed donors whose charitable acts are likely to be more typical of those that sustain charities' voluntary income. The 60 interviews were conducted between January and August 2009, and interview lengths ranged from 10 to 40 minutes, with most lasting around 25 minutes.

The research interviews were approached as *"a conversation with a purpose"* (Robson 1993:228) and a semi-structured format was used, which combined specified questions with the freedom to *"probe beyond the answers… [to] seek both clarification and elaboration on the answers given"* (May 1997:111). The interviews comprised open-ended questions about four inter-related topics: (1) how donors define charity; (2) perceptions of the type of people and causes that (a) *do* benefit and that (b) *should* benefit from charitable activity; (3) the basis on which donors select charities to receive their donations; and (4) their experience, as donors, of also being beneficiaries of charitable activity. The full interview schedule can be found in appendix A.

The remainder of this paper contains the presentation and illustration of eight interim findings, some thoughts on how the data might be analysed by drawing on three theoretical perspectives and ends with some concluding thoughts.

Findings

The interim findings support Fenton et al's conclusion that donors have a broad expectation that charities will serve the poor. Typically, respondents claim that charitable organisations exist, *"to help needy people", "to do something worthwhile"* and to undertake *"good works"*, and they typically define the beneficiaries of charitable activity with terms such as, *"the needy", "the underprivileged",* and *"people in a disadvantaged position"*. Frequently, beneficiaries are viewed as victims of their circumstances, for example they are said to be, *"people who can't defend themselves", "people without a voice"* and *"anything that can't look after itself for whatever reason".* Some respondents took a more relativistic position, suggesting that they donate to, *"people who are worse off than me"* or *"people I feel sorry for"*. Combinations of reasons were also often given, including non-needs based drivers, for example, *"I suppose it's people who I'm either particularly sorry for or who I have friends who've experienced the same problem".* Occasionally, interviewees refused to answer the question, for example one rejected the premise by saying, *"I don't think it's for me to say what need is really, from my nice, middle-class, double-income existence. How is it for me to say that this person is needier than that person?"*

However, despite almost unanimous depictions of charity as a vehicle by which the better-off meet the needs of others, when respondents were asked to describe the causes they actually support and the decision-making process behind these decisions, it became clear that assessments of the neediness of prospective beneficiaries were not the sole criteria. Indeed, four criteria other than need were identified as factors in donors' decision-making processes: donor taste, charity competence, personal background and desire for personal impact.

Four further interim findings are also presented, concerning the degree of care taken by committed donors in selecting recipients, the use of classifications or 'mental maps' to make sense of the charity sector, the use of strategies to assist selection of recipients and the automatic inclusion and exclusion of certain charitable causes.

Finding 1: The role of donor taste in selection of charitable recipients
Firstly, personal taste was found to be a particularly salient factor in choosing charitable beneficiaries. Respondents typically report supporting, *"things that happen to appeal to me",* causes that are *"nearer to my heart"* and charities *"that I admire"* and am *"comfortable giving to".*

This approach might collectively be termed 'taste-based giving', as opposed to 'needs-based giving', and the donors' rationale in taking the former approach is illustrated in the following quotes:

> *"It's really what in one's own mind one thinks is a deserving cause, and it does range, you know, hugely widely, and totally irrationally. I mean, I would support deserving dogs but I wouldn't support cats [laughs] because I just happen not to like cats"*
>
> *"I donate to the RSPB [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] because birdwatching is one of my great obsessions. It's my, kind of, my treat to myself, if you like".*
>
> *"I do think the thing with opera is interesting because you are to some extent donating in order to then provide something to a middle-class audience, but then I don't think that about the National Trust like that, so that again is based on the fact that I don't like opera but I do like historic houses [laughs]"*
>
> *"Why do I support animal charities? Well, I'm a big fan of rhinoceroses [laughs]"*
>
> *"[I support] Sustrans because we're interested in cycling… Ramblers [Association] sometimes, because we like walking. The RSPB because we like bird-watching".*

Taste and personal preferences are clearly a factor in some giving decisions, even for donors who describe themselves as motivated by needs. Examples of the discrepancy between theory and practice include a donor who defined the appropriate beneficiaries of charity as, *"people in hunger or poverty or ill health"* yet went on to describe the focus of his support as saving paintings for the nation and environmental issues because, *"we like the countryside, I suppose [laughs]"*. Another donor claimed her giving was concerned with *"people who are suffering"* yet noted, *"I belong to English heritage and troop* *around places and that's a charitable thing, isn't it?"* A third example is an interviewee who describes appropriate beneficiaries as, *"people who are hard up in this country and people who are hard up abroad"*, but explains that he supports steam railway restoration projects, claiming,

> *"I think it's sort of worthwhile from the point of view of society, I feel its worth keeping them going as sort of something this country has been able to do in the past and is still quite good at doing now… [so] I did put a rather large sum of money into helping to buy an old Victorian steam engine… I hope maybe when it gets going I might be allowed to stand on the footplate and blow the whistle [laughs]".*

A final example is a donor who described himself as a supporter of, *"people who need help"* before revealing himself as a major benefactor of a canal restoration project in his home town; he explained this giving decisions as follows:

> *"Having lived there for 20 years I never knew there was a canal there in this particular area, so it's partly nostalgia, partly local interest and the fact that here are these people who I thought were relatively unsung, going out to work one Sunday every month. I though 'well, I can't go and join them but I can cough up'."*

Finding 2: The role of perceptions of charity competence in selection of charitable recipients

The second non-needs based criteria employed in giving decisions concerns judgements regarding the competence of recipient organisations, such that charities are selected for support on the basis of being *"well-run", "efficient", "charities that don't pay their staff too much"* and *"charities that have low overheads".* A typical comment was, *"I don't think you want [to support] people who've got great big offices and give great big salaries and things like that".* Respondents made numerous, unprompted comments about their fears of inefficient spending by charitable organisations. For example, they sought out those that spend *"very, very little on admin or staff or any of the trimmings"* and sought to avoid those that spend money on, *"plush offices and being political"*. However, other respondents note the difficulties in making accurate assessments about charity efficiency, for example:

> *"I understand X charity are extremely good at delivering their money on site, so to speak, and they keep their administration costs as low as they can, but so much of this is hearsay isn't it? Unless you pore over the books and understand what you're reading, I think it's very difficult".*

Given the difficulties in obtaining (and understanding) objective information on charities' general competence, common proxies for assessing competence include the frequency and estimated cost of charity mailings: *"if they send too many I feel they're just wasting the money, not spending it properly and so we cut them out"* and the accuracy of administrative activity: *"My first filter is if the address is wrong."*

In the cases exemplified above, respondents largely accept that the charities concerned could be doing a perfectly good job of meeting important needs or delivering public goods, but subjective assessments of their competence were used to filter them out as potential recipients.

Finding 3: The role of personal background in selection of charitable recipients

The third criteria identified behind charitable giving decisions is donors' personal background, such that people draw on their own life experiences to create what Payton and Moody call 'philanthropic autobiographies' (2008:21).

Three examples of statements illustrating autobiographical motivators of giving are:

> *"I grew up by the sea so I support the RNLI"*
> *"I have a child and the very first thing I started off doing was child sponsorship"*,
> *"My brother died of bowel cancer so I give to cancer research".*

However, it would be wrong to conclude from this finding that charitable behaviour is deterministic, as many interviewees noted personal connections that did not result in donations, as illustrated by these three examples:

> *"My wife died of cancer and yet I don't support cancer charities, I don't think there is a big personal element".*
> *"I have dear friends who died in X hospice but you can't support everywhere".*
> *"I exclude most medical ones, cancer for instance, although I've plenty of experience of cancer in the family".*

Finding 4: The role of personal impact in selection of charitable recipients

The fourth non-needs based criteria for giving is a desire to make an impactful donation that is not 'drowned out' by support from other donors or the government. The donor quoted at the end of the last paragraph, who does not support cancer charities despite extensive personal experience of this illness, went on to explain his stance by stating: *"I think it's probably over-subscribed"*. Similar examples include a respondent whose donations are depressed by an awareness of the charity's popularity: *"I support them, but as there are a million members I don't feel I need to respond to every appeal from them, somebody else can!"* and a donor who is supportive of an organisation but chooses not to support it because, *"the impression I got is they are well-off compared to other charities".*

Donors were particularly keen to avoid their donations becoming a substitute for government spending, typically stating: *"I hate to think that we're doing things that the government ought to do"*. However, despite widespread (if implicit) acknowledgement of the economic concept of 'crowding out', donors' preferences can over-ride such calculations, as one respondent says, *"with things like the British Library, I mean they're quite well funded but it's just something I believe in".*

Finding 5. Committed donors are not necessarily careful donors

Interviewees were often disarmingly honest about the gaps in their knowledge regarding the causes and charities they support. Despite being a CAF account holder and distributing thousands of pounds a year, one donor prefaced his replies by saying, *"I'm going to be the wrong person to ask because I'm not sure I give it that much intellectual thought"*. Another asks, *"Why did I choose those particular ones? Well, that has been a bit haphazard to be quite honest with you. I mean, I've sort of come across them as I've gone along".* Others were dismissive of the suggestion that this decision-making required much attention, saying: *"I don't think I go into it that deeply. If I'm satisfied it's being helpful and there's a need... you know, we're keen to help"*, and, *"I'm not methodical about it... I don't have any very good way of choosing… I just go by gut instinct I suppose"*. Another claims to support, *"basically anything that catches my eye… It's just what grabs me and what doesn't".* When the same donor was asked to explain why he started supporting a charity he replied, *"Err, to be honest, I don't know".*

The following exchange illustrates the gap that became frequently apparent between my level of interest in charitable decision-making and that of my respondents:
Donor: *"I've just realised I've got a list [of my donations] here. It says, 'The X foundation'*
BB: *"What does that do?"*
Donor" *"I'm not even sure now [laughs].*

Indeed, donors often had trouble recalling exactly what it is they support and had difficulties remembering the names of recipient causes, for example: *"It's not the Stroke Association but it is a charity that deals with strokes"*, another said, *"I would give to cancer research, that's not to say that I know the difference between all these diseases"* and a third struggled to recall the name of one of his recipients, *"the hospital for, what do they call themselves? Not disabled, neuro-something disorders [laughs]. It's in Putney".*

Finding 6. Classifications help donors to cope with the complexity of the charity sector
Despite the existence of the over-arching category of 'charity', many respondents reported creating their own classifications or 'mental map' of the different types of charitable organisations that they could potentially support. Such classifications were frequently used (explicitly and implicitly) to explain the distribution of donations, for example: *"I've broken it down into areas"* or, *"I've sort of got two distinct categories: [things] to do with being a Christian and what my beliefs are… [and things] motivated from my pleasures if you like"*. Another respondent explains the logic behind his classifications:

> *"I've got my 'doing good' group, who deliver help to people in need, and those that do 'uplifting work', who try to inject something into society like the arts, that's not critical or vital but which nevertheless improves the general state of society"***.**

Donors often made binary distinctions when listing their recipients, the two most common being: 'people charities' and 'animal charities' and 'domestic charities' and 'international charities' (sometimes referred to as 'home and away'). Table 1 presents these and some further binary schemas utilised (again both explicitly and implicitly) by donors.

People charities	Animal charities
Domestic causes	International causes
Urgent needs	Ongoing needs
Local charities	National charities
Big charities	Small charities
Charities with low overheads	Charities with high overheads
Charities that respect my wishes	Charities that do not respect my wishes
Things that interest me	Things that don't interest me
Things I feel I should support	Things I enjoy supporting
Causes I think are important	Causes I don't care about
Causes I have a personal connection to	Causes I don't have a personal connection to
Things I've always cared about	Things I care about because of personal experience
Charities with a big 'C'	Charities with a small 'c'

Table 1: Binary distinctions made by donors in classifying their recipients

One interviewee explicitly describes the process by which he processes potential donations in his mind: *"I think, 'yeah, I approve of that, that kind of fits my categories'. Tick… and if they don't fit my broad criteria it'd be a 'no'".* Yet the presence of mental categories is acknowledged as being insufficient as one donor notes, *"If I was to give to X, have I done enough research to know that it fits my criteria? The honest truth is no, I haven't, I've made some assumptions there."*

Finding 7: Donors find it difficult to make decisions about charitable recipients and use strategies to assist decision-making

Despite the sample being comprised of individuals who take a methodical approach to their giving (by definition of being CAF account holders), these committed donors often report that charitable giving involves ongoing, complex decision-making. Interviewees were often upfront about the difficulty in making a choice between the many organisations vying for support: *"I couldn't really have any definite reason for saying 'yes' or 'no', but you can't support the lot. I stick a pin in".* As one donor says, *"The trouble is there's so many"* and another notes, *"It's amazing what comes through the door, and you've got no means of making an objective judgement".*

Strategies to cope with the "bombardment" of requests for support range from the comprehensive:

> *"I'm one of those who never turns anything away. I've actually got a box… everything goes in, in turn, into the box and I give to 2 a month… [and] I make sure that everybody gets something over the year"*,

to entirely random strategies: *"I tend to respond if it comes on my birthday, for instance, or if it comes on my wife's birthday, I say, 'Well you're in luck, you're going to get something'".* Further rather arbitrary methods for filtering out requests include a respondent who claims,

> *"I don't particularly have a leaning, I mean these are all worthy causes and it's very difficult I think to distinguish between them so… I ignore all the begging letters through the year then I start collecting them from about October onwards, and in December I sit down, work out roughly how many there are, chuck out the odd one or two that for some reason I don't particularly like, but generally I'm pretty even-handed".*

Finding 8. Some donors perceive some causes as automatically deserving or undeserving of support

The final finding is that, in some cases donors felt no decision was required because a cause was so obviously worthy, or unworthy of their support.

Many interviewees were keen to name the types of causes they would refuse to support, even though that question was not posed, but this was almost always coupled with an explanation for the refusal, for example, *"I don't tend to give to animal charities because I think they get lots of money anyway and have more than they can deal with".* Other types of justification for excluding certain causes (despite no justification being requested) include a personalised scale of priorities: *"I don't on the whole give to medical charities, not because I've got anything against them but I would rather feel that I'm helping the starving or somebody in more urgent need".* Whilst donors were often keen to volunteer the causes they did not approve of or support, 'not approving' and 'not supporting' were not always one and the same category, for example, one respondent said, *"I would rather see that resource directed more broadly to those who have greater need… [so] I have reservations about arts and cultural charities, although I am a member of one*".

Whilst some causes were automatically excluded by donors, the reverse was also found to exist. Some respondents could not articulate the rationale for their support because they perceive it to be beyond question. For example, one said: *"Well I think my support for charity X is self-explanatory. I can't imagine anyone not wanting to give to support their work".* It would be useful to explore this finding further, to discern if there are any steps a charity can take to increase their likelihood of being viewed as 'self-explanatory' and therefore automatically deserving of support.

Analysis: using three theoretical perspectives to understand the data

Choosing how to select recipients from the many thousands of charities that require support is a complex problem that has significant consequences for donors, recipients, non-recipients and wider society. As every donor that I spoke to supported more than one charity, there are clearly an enormous number of combinations of options for distributing philanthropic donations. Yet donors are not only restricted by the amount of money they have available to give away, their decision-making is also restricted by the amount of information they can gather, their ability to cognitively process the merits of alternative recipients and the amount of time they are able, or willing, to devote to this decision-making process.

Three theoretical approaches are suggested as helpful for understanding how such complex decision-making takes place and for making sense of the data gathered in this project.

Firstly, Charles Lindblom's work on 'the science of muddling through' examines the approaches that people take to solving complex problems. Despite pretensions by public policy analysts (the focus of his study) to undertake fully systematic methods that involve considering and evaluating every single permutation of possibilities, Lindblom suggest such an approach is impossible due to the excessive costs in terms of time and money and the fact that it, *“assumes intellectual capacities and sources of information that men simply do not possess”* (Lindblom 1959:80). Instead, he claims that most complex problems are in fact tackled by ‘muddling through’, also labelled ‘incrementalism’, which involves focusing decision-making on options that differ in only a small degree from options that have previously been taken and are therefore familiar (p.84), such that decision makers are *“continually building out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degrees”* (p.81).

Lindblom’s model is a realistic depiction of decision-making, which acknowledges that people do not attempt to make *the best* decisions but rather have less-ambitious goals of making *better* decisions. Whilst written for a public policy audience, Lindblom notes that,

> *“the same model is inevitably resorted to in personal problem solving, where means and ends are impossible to separate, where aspirations or objectives undergo constant development, and where drastic simplification of the complexity of the real world is urgent if problems are to be solved in the time that can be given to them”* (p.88).

Of particular relevance to this paper is Lindblom’s claim that people “muddle through” rather than make “rational-comprehensive” decisions because, even if it were possible to have absolute clarity regarding objectives and a fully comprehensive overview of all relevant information, the absence of a means for quantifying the values represented in alternative options impedes the functioning of this approach. For example, with reference to table 1, whilst a donor may be certain that she values supporting people more highly than supporting animals, the extent to which she would choose to sacrifice support for animals in order to help people is not clear, such as in a scenario where the same size donation could help a million animals forever or one person for a day. Nor is it clear that the values she claims to prefer will remain constant in all future decision-making situations, for example if a neighbour asks her to support a local animal sanctuary then ties of friendship and/or propinquity might result in a positive response that is inconsistent with her expressed preferences. Finally, the actual beneficiaries of charities are not always clear-cut, as one interviewee who supports an animal charity says,

> *“the X charity is really good because it provides veterinary services to the animals of people who wouldn’t be able to afford it otherwise, so I think that’s not just animal-focused, that’s actually focused at society as well, it recognises the importance of people who aren’t necessarily rich”*

Revisiting his theory in a later paper, Lindblom says we must “muddle through” because we are simply unable to achieve intellectual mastery of complex social problems:

> *“No person, committee, or research team, even with all the resources of modern electronic computation, can complete the analysis of a complex problem. Too many interacting values are at stake, too many possible alternatives”* (Lindblom 1979:518).

This is a plausible description of the situation facing donors who are willing to give and keen to make good choices, but lack the resources and ability to make the 'best' choice so must use other strategies, such as pursuing their personal preferences or drawing on their autobiography.

The application of Lindblom's theory of 'muddling through' or incrementalism to decision-making around charitable giving implies that path dependency and inertia are key factors. Donors do not assess the merits of every cause that seeks their support, nor do they demonstrate a willingness to thoroughly revise the focus of their donations. Rather, they generally build upon past decisions, making incremental changes, perhaps adding a new recipient that fits within pre-existing categories that are mentally 'approved' as one donor illustrates: *"We tend to really, having made the decision, we more or less keep the same ones going each year, rather than chop and change each year".* Such inertia exists despite donors' awareness that it does not result in optimal decisions for the door or for the charity sector, as the following two quotes, respectively, illustrate:

> *"I have a list which I keep fairly methodically so as to donate once a year and there are items on that list which probably shouldn't really be there, but perhaps through laziness remain".*
>
> *"There comes a point where you get endless letters from charities and you think, 'yes, they do need help: blind people need help, cancer people need help', but you have to draw a line and you have to say, 'I'm awfully sorry but I've got my list… these things seem to be the ones we've come across and we've had no reason to, erm, stop supporting them".*

Lindblom describes his 'science of muddling through' as being in the same mould of 'less heroic' decision making as that entailed in Herbert Simon's famed concept of 'bounded rationality' (Simon 1981), which is the second theoretical perspective that can usefully be applied to this data. Simon also notes that individual rationality is limited by the finite amount of information we possess, the cognitive limitations of our minds and the amount of time we are willing and able to devote to making decisions. In the absence of the resources and abilities to make fully rational decisions, he argues that we must instead accept the limits of our bounded rationality and seek satisfactory, rather than optimal, solutions. The need to pursue decision-making strategies based on adequacy rather than on optimisation (which Herbert calls 'satisficing') is driven not only by finite resources, our engagement in concurrent activities and conditions of uncertainty (such that it is impossible to have perfect and complete information at any given time) but also by the fact that decision-making involves a mixture of the partial information that we possess and the values and preferences that we hold at any given time. The dynamic nature of values, and the potential for the values we hold to change or be re-prioritised, is clearly relevant to this paper.

Simon suggests that individuals operating under conditions of bounded rationality use heuristics to guide decision-making, with a notable reliance upon the influence of authority and ties of loyalty. The data presented in this paper provides some support for Simon's argument, as donors report using these kinds of heuristics to filter decisions about which causes to support. For example one donor states that his biggest donation goes to a charity endorsed by the broadcaster John Humphries (who he does not have a personal relationship with), because:

> *"I think we endow him with a great deal of our personal trust in that he does what he says he's gonna do… I mean he is somebody who my wife has said if he ever lets us down she'll go round and personally kill him [laughs]".*

Many examples of ties of individual and organisational loyalty are also apparent in the data: church-going donors often support the charities chosen by their congregation, *"We've also got a link, the church, with a parish in Zimbabwe, so we support that",* and donations are often sent in response to the requests made by loved ones at life events, notably funerals but also weddings, christenings and other important ritual events. For example, one respondent explained, *"a very close friend who died was concerned with X charity so that began in that way… both Y and Z I donate to for personal reasons of bereavement"*. A further heuristic that donors often reply upon is judgements about charity competence that are based on the proxy of charity communications, as discussed in finding 2 above.

The third theoretical approach to be discussed here is Mary Douglas' work on the sociology of consumption, in which she argues that consumption decisions are mediated by personal interests, values and cultural factors. Applying this analysis to charitable giving, she argues that decisions about what types of charity to support, which 'others' we feel responsible for and the extent that support should take are,

> *"nothing to do with class, or with education, language, race or colour, but everything to do with the pattern of claims vested in the cultural environment"* (Douglas 1996:129).

Therefore, Douglas argues that, *"If you really want to understand charity, you will need a way of taking into account cultural effects on giving"* (p.117). This approach has important implications for the study of charitable giving and philanthropy in the UK as the data currently collected assumes it is essentially an individual or household decision that can be analysed in terms of variables such as gender, age, educational attainment and so on, yet we know almost nothing about the cultural context that Douglas claims is so essential for making sense of giving decisions. The findings presented in this study similarly lack cultural context, beyond what can be implied from the data collected for each donor regarding gender, age, location, income bracket; these variables will be analysed more thoroughly in future outputs from this project.

A concept developed by Douglas that is apparent in the data is the existence of what she terms 'cultural refusal', by which she means the fact that people do not pay attention to, or even notice, options that are culturally alien to them. Cultural refusal involves screening out certain goods or services that are incompatible with our identity, for example the donor quoted in finding 1 above, who does not countenance support for the opera, may be 'refusing' that cause because it threatens her identity in some way. The existence of ‘automatic exclusions’ described in finding 8 also support Douglas’ claim that, *“people do not know what they want, but they are very clear about what they do not want”* (Douglas 1997:xx). This point is illustrated in my data by interviewees who, despite not being asked about the causes they refuse to support, are keen to put those categories they exclude on record, for example, *“I don’t do animals”* and *“I never support organisations working abroad”.* Refusing to even consider whole swathes of the charity sector is one strategy for making decision-making manageable, as one respondent explained, *“I’ve certain areas that I tend to go for and others that I exclude automatically simply in order to reduce the field”.*

Conclusions

New data on donors’ perceptions regarding the nature of charitable activity, the identity of charitable beneficiaries and the rationale behind contributions, has been presented in this paper. It has been suggested that, despite continuing widespread assumptions regarding need as the sole driver of charitable donations, beneficiaries are also selected on the basis of donor taste, concerns about non-profit competence, personal background and a desire for personal impact.

The suggestion that charitable donations are sources of personal and collective identity as well as efforts to promote the public good, echoes Silber’s finding that the choice of who we give to and what we support, *“are very much matters of personal commitment, taste and identification”* (Silber 1998:141-2). It is also present in the suggestion that we are all “discriminating altruists” (Piliavin and Charng 1990:53), which recognises that nobody has the resources to support every single type of cause.

The finding of an apparent lack of rigour involved in making decisions about charitable donations requires further exploration and explanation, because giving is often assumed to be an important aspect of life for many donors and the total sums donated are not insignificant – over £10 billion in 2007/08 (Pharoah 2009:17). If it is the case that even committed donors are not especially careful in distributing their donations, as one interviewee says, *“it’s not something that keeps me awake at night”,* then this has implications for the current debate around providing greater information in order to help donors make better decisions. It may be that many are content to ‘muddle through’ and will not avail themselves of new information that becomes available.

However, there is some evidence that donors do care about the destination of their giving, though this concern may be more about maximising their personal satisfaction than seeking optimum outcomes from a broader societal perspective. This is often suggested with reference to major donors or so-called ‘new philanthropists’ who are thought to be particularly interested in the process, destination and impact of their giving and of whom it is said that they,

> *“do not give to needy causes or worthy organisations. They give to dreams, to visions, to bold imaginative ventures. They give to projects*

> *in which they are interested. In which they have had an opportunity in designing the program"* (Panas 1984:116).

In a similar vein it is suggested that,

> *"[f]or non-profits, a failure to align with a donor's interest is the biggest single reason why they will miss out on securing funding from an ultra high net worth family"* (Love, Raymond et al. 2009:12).

Yet this paper suggests that this outlook is not exclusive to major donors, as many respondents sought to align their interests with their charitable giving and to use their donations to pursue their passions, preferences and personal involvement.

Whether rich or non-rich, it is clear that charitable giving is not only concerned with promoting the public benefit, solving social problems or meeting needs, it is also (perhaps crucially) about the self-realisation of the donor. Self-actualisation has previously been indentified as a driver amongst our wealthiest citizens (Lloyd 2004:83), but this paper suggests the dividing line between 'major' or 'new' philanthropists and more ordinary, committed donors may not be so clear as is often supposed.

This paper should not be read as any sort of criticism of donors who choose to focus their giving on causes that do not meet the most urgent or pressing of human needs, because, as has long been recognised, the freedom to give is an essential element of a liberal society (Titmuss 1970) and donor autonomy is a crucial factor in realising the impulse to give (Frumkin 2006:370). Yet there is an important – and as yet largely unaddressed – question about how to reconcile the freedom of the donor with the pursuit of solidarity, social coherence and a moral belief in meeting the basic needs of all? The answer may lie in the processes surrounding taste formation: if giving decisions are driven by personal taste as much as by assessments of need, then encouraging people to develop a taste for equality and inculcating values of social justice from an early age, may result in increased support for charitable organisations whose activities have greater redistributional consequences.

Appendix A: Interview schedule

1. I want to talk about the causes that you support in a moment but can I begin by asking what you picture when you think of a charity?

2. And still at that very general level, can I ask who, or what, you think are the beneficiaries of the charitable sector?

3. Now could you please tell me about the charities and causes that you choose to donate money to?

4. Thinking of the charities and causes that you support, can you please tell me what prompted you to choose them in the first place and why you continue to support them?

5. Who do you think are the main beneficiaries of the charities that you support?

6. Does it matter to you whether the recipients of your donations are ‘in need’ or not?

7. Thank you for telling me about the charities that you support. You may be aware that in the UK over 160,000 organisations operate as charities, with very different aims, from supporting the arts to overseas aid. How do you feel about the fact that so many different activities are all labelled as ‘charity’?

8. Do you expect organisations that are run as charities to serve people in need? Or are you happy for them to have a broader focus?

9. Bearing in mind the many different types of organisations that operate as charities, can you think of any examples where you or your loved ones, have benefited from the work of charitable organisations?

10. Do you have any final comments on anything that we have talked about?

Four pieces of factual information were also recorded for each interviewee, often the answers became apparent during the interview, where they were still unclear they were asked at the end:

- Gender
- Age (which decade)
- Location (city/county)
- Income (self-defined as: low, middle or high)

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